ATA 59D
Historical Debates: The Politics of History Writing
Mehmet Yercil

Spring 2014
Wednesday 10:00-13:00
Office hours: Wednesday 14:00-16:00 and by appointment.
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Course Description
History, it has been said, is nothing if not debate. This course will revisit arguably the most important historical debate of the late 20th century, the Sonderweg, which can be translated as Germany’s “special path” to modernity.

With the benefit of hindsight, some historians of Germany argued in the 1970s and ‘80s that the presence of pre-industrial formations and a backboneless bourgeoisie in an advanced economy of breath-taking progress was a harbinger of imperialism, the Great War, and the fascism that would ensue. Other historians disagreed. Instead, they favoured looking at internal processes of German society to understand whether the German bourgeoisie was as powerless as claimed. They challenged the normative idea of “a lack” of a bourgeois revolution and analysed the German public sphere within its own dynamic to arrive at their conclusions. Both camps of the debate were represented by leftist historians.

The debate spun off many other subcategories of enormously important questions regarding the writing of history involving questions of teleology, of continuity vs contingency, of structures vs change, of public sphere and hegemony, of agency and political guilt. As answers to these questions had implications for the most calamitous period of world history which involved the First and the Second World Wars, the debate could only be extremely heated, and so it was.

This course will offer you a chance to familiarize yourself with some very important questions in history writing with the added benefit of applied case studies in Ottoman history. What was the driver of German interest –some would argue imperialism– in the Ottoman Empire?

After covering this debate with Ottoman applications in the first 8 weeks, we will take a look at how the cultural turn affected the Sonderweg debate, which was essentially a politico-social history. Further on, we will be looking at the transnational turn, as to how this current trend is affecting the politics of history writing. A case study of a recent best-seller on the decentred origins of the First World War will be analysed in terms of what we have learned from the Sonderweg discussion.

We will end the course with the study of Perry Anderson’s –some would say controversial– thought-provoking interpretation of modern Turkish history.
Course Requirements
This is a seminar with rather dense reading assignments. You should make time for reading roughly 100-150 pages each week. If it proves to be too hard on you, there is some, but very little, scope for shortening some readings. We may discuss this as we go along.

Class attendance and participation in discussions based on weekly readings: 20%
One relatively short paper of 3000 words, which will be due in week 11, double-spaced: 30%
One longer paper of 4000 words due at the end of term, double-spaced: 50%

Course Schedule
Week 1 (19 February): An Introduction to Imperial Germany (the Kaiserreich, 1870-1918): The Continuity Problematic into the Nazi Period

Week 2 (26 February): An Introduction to the Sonderweg Debate


Week 3 (5 March): Sonderweg I: The Advocates


Week 4 (12 March): Sonderweg II: The Critics (I)
Week 5 (19 March): Sonderweg III: The Critics (II)

Week 6 (26 March): Final Overview of the Sonderweg Debate: Continuity vs Contingency, Historical Change vs. Structure


Week 7 (2 April): Test Case 1: German Interest in the Ottoman Empire: Railways and Colonial Aims. (Midterm take-home will be distributed.)
Course material to be distributed. We will be testing the sources of the interest in the Ottoman Empire in light of the Sonderweg debate.

Week 8 (9 April): Test Case 2: German Archaeology and the Ottoman Empire
We will be linking this topic to Sonderweg discussions.

Week 9 (16 April): The Cultural Turn and Its Effects on the Politics of History


**Week 10 (30 April): The Problematic of Eurocentrism’s Repudiation and the Arrival of the Global**


**Week 11 (7 May): The Transnational (or Global) Turn and its Effects on the Politics of History (FIRST PAPER DUE)**


Jennifer L. Jenkins, Kris Manjapra, Hoi-eun Kim, Young-Sun Hong, and Corinna R. Unger, “Asia, Germany and the Transnational Turn,” forum interview by Bradley Naranch, German History vol. 28, no. 4 (2010), 515-36.


Andreas Fahrmeir, review of Das Kaiserreich Transnational: Deutschland in der Welt 1871-1914, German History vol. 26, no. 2 (2008), 322-23.

**Week 12 (14 May): Test Case 3: A Bestseller and the Debate on the Origins of the First World War.**


Annika Mombauer, “The First World War: Inevitable, Avoidable, Improbable or Desirable? Recent Interpretations on War Guilt and the War’s Origins,” German History vol. 25, no. 1 (2007), 78-95

Week 13 (21 May): Case 4: Perry Anderson’s Modern Turkish History

Final paper will be due on Friday, 16 June at 11 am.